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SKILLS, SKILLS, SKILLS! – NEW ORDER OR SAME OLD STORY?

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The triple education mantra used by New Labour (and the Tory opposition) in the 1997 election has been nauseatingly over utilised in the last few years. However, its recent replacement by the new mantra ‘Skills, Skills, Skills’ is not just nauseating – it is seriously misguided and potentially damaging to VET policy and practice. Cycles of fashion and changes of label and language seem to be a permanent feature of educational policy-making but, arguably, VET has – more than any other sphere – been especially afflicted in recent times by such sloganising and ‘newspeak’ trends.

Everybody with any involvement in VET is bound to have experienced a depressing feeling of *déjà vu* in response to the recent resurrection of the old ‘skills’ agenda in New Labour policy for the post-compulsory education and training (PCET) sector. Just as education became synonymous with training in line with the ‘new vocationalism’ in the 1970s and 1980s, so ‘skills’ of one kind or another came to stand for the aims, processes and content of learning and teaching throughout the same period. After a short interregnum under the NCVQ from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s during which ‘competences’ came to stand for just about everything in VET, the skills agenda is well and truly back with us.

It is now absolutely essential for all policy documents to contain the key slogan word. Recent examples in response to the pronouncements of the National Skills Task Force include *Opportunity for All: Skills for the New Economy* and *Opportunity and Skills in the Knowledge-Driven Economy*. The policy papers were published by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in 2001, just before it changed its name to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). This is an interesting change of title carrying with it the subtle implication that there are no problems of employment any more, just problems of skills – skills gaps, needs, requirements and shortages.

Presumably ‘education’ was maintained in the departmental title – after all ‘learning’ seems to have replaced it in most other contexts – so that the DfES would not be confused with its subordinate quango the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and its

47 regional bodies. Just to complete the new skills map, the National Training Organisations which oversee VET-employer collaborative links in the various occupational domains are to be re-christened Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), charged by the Secretary of State with leading policy developments in the field. If all this is meant to suggest that over a century's training ills – not to mention the appalling lack of strategic planning in VET by employers and successive governments – can be cured by a (skilful?) stroke of the DfES pen, then the suggestion is ludicrous and ahistorical.

Is all this skill-talk just a shorthand way of referring to the objectives of education and training – knowledge, understanding, abilities and personal qualities – or is it yet another attempt to replace traditional aims with fashionable technical jargon which serves to deflect attention from the weaknesses and deficiencies of the system? Whatever the reason the insane obsession with skills is as irrational, illogical and potentially dangerous as its former incarnations and ought to be challenged by VET teachers and trainers at all levels. Apart from the brute historical fact that all the previous reforms associated with skills have actually resulted in the de-valuing and downgrading of VET, there are three principal reasons for mounting such a challenge.

1. The concept of skills is vague, ill-founded and nebulous, with no shared understanding of whether it applies to cognitive, affective or psychomotor objectives. Faced with typical lists of skills which include 'taking orders', 'fault-finding', 'problem-solving', 'working with others', 'reasoning', 'critical thinking' – not to mention the ever popular 'life', 'enterprise' and 'people' skills – we are bound to ask whether the same descriptive concept is being used in all cases. How can such an apparently infinitely elastic and systematically ambiguous notion of 'skill' possibly be of use to anyone involved in VET learning and teaching, let alone to employers, parents or policy-makers?
2. The indiscriminate use of skill-talk serves to belittle the role and status of knowledge and understanding in VET, thus seriously impoverishing learning of all kinds. Such reductionism causes us to overlook the fact that all so-called skills – from using a computer to writing a technical report - need to be founded upon knowledge, understanding and practical experience. Moreover, since such a foundation is logically and epistemologically *prior* to the development and exercise of anything called a skill, a simplistic over-emphasis on physicality or outward

performance can be educationally counter-productive by replacing knowledgeable practice with surface technique.

3.A more sinister aspect of skill-talk is its tendency to reduce human agency to quantifiable and measurable bits of behaviour thereby trivialising central features of personhood. Moral and personal qualities – even those which always head the list of employers' preferences such as loyalty, industry, trustworthiness and honesty – are simply *not* skills of any kind and any attempt to make them so is likely to frustrate the achievement of crucially important aims in this field. Ethical traits are constitutive of human behaviour in ways in which skills are not. The concept of a good plumber, chef, teacher, nurse or electrician is not synonymous with the idea of a person who possesses a range of skills. Morality – along with knowledge, understanding and experience – is intrinsic to the idea of personal agency whereas skills have only a contingent relationship.

In addition to all this, it has to be said that the claims for so-called 'core' or 'key' skills about general transferability independent of context are logically and empirically unfounded. All the empirical studies investigating the ways in which work-based learning occurs indicate that this cannot be divorced from either occupational context or content. Skilful practice in any field is usually generated from a foundation of specialised knowledge and domain-specific experience. Fault-finding, report-writing, and problem-solving all mean very little outside specific VET contexts in which faults are found, reports written and problems solved. Any key skills programme which suggests something other than this is misdirected and intellectually dishonest.

If recent government pronouncements are really about improving basic skills – and around 7 million adults are thought to have difficulties in terms of literacy and numeracy – then why not just recommend programmes to improve reading, writing and number? Similarly, if industry needs more recruits with specialised computing abilities, knowledge of engineering processes at intermediate technician level, sales and marketing experience or qualities of loyalty and trust, then why not just say this so that school and post-school programmes can make sure that such content is given priority?

In the recent policy document about the DfES plans for 14-19 education and training – *Schools: Achieving Success* – there is an official complaint (to be placed alongside similar ones going back at least to the 19th century) about the ways in which

vocational education has been persistently undervalued in the English system. The 1970s and 1980s experiments with skills only served to reinforce this subordinate status of VET and the current skills mania is unlikely to fare any better. The Secretary of State should say exactly what she means by calling on educators to work with employers in bridging skills gaps, particularly since almost all the past schemes involving employers – from youth training to NVQs – have been distinguished chiefly by their failure to achieve any of the objectives set for them.

Instead of vague statements about skills, we need systematic learning programmes for VET which spell out aims, objectives, processes and content and which have a solid foundation in knowledge, understanding and practical experience. ‘Motherhood and apple pie’ slogans may make persuasive political rhetoric but they are educationally worthless and no help at all to VET educators, students, trainees or employers.
